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The Impact of Samoan Pre-service Teacher Education on Student Learning

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Education in Samoa is strongly influenced by western theories of teaching and learning. Through the influence of missionaries in colonial times, and the subsequent impact of colonial policies, education has become a central site for contestation of identity. The transition to an independent state led Samoa to seek help in restructuring its pre-service teacher education. Subsequently the influence of New Zealand and Australia has dominated administrative and policy assistance. In postcolonial Samoa, the colonial influence still prevails, the result being that while many students enter teacher education, few have critical perspectives on educational issues. A superficial understanding compounded with limited English language competencies makes it difficult to acquire new wisdom and theories. Openness to accepting changes in teaching styles that incorporate both western and indigenous perspectives could contribute to teacher development. This paper draws on talanoa and nofo methodologies to study twenty pre-service teachers. It highlights the dilemmas facing them in attempting to fit into the system and finding what they learn to be irrelevant to their teaching responsibilities. The study further draws on interviews with an executive from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture to illustrate how the curriculum lacks relevance in the Samoan context, contributing to an inappropriate pre-service teacher training program. The paper concludes that Samoan local educational needs must be addressed to ensure the teacher education system is inclusive of local values and knowledge.

Keywords: pre-service teacher education; Samoa; talanoa and nofo methodologies; local knowledge and wisdom

INTRODUCTION

The Samoan Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC, 2006, p. 11) describes education as a lifelong process that provides meaningful social and cultural ideas and methods to assist with individuals' living situations. Similarly, its *Education for All Report* (MESC, 2015a, p.8) emphasises the importance of "improving the quality of education for all", which is a major educational strategy for the development of Samoa. Most nations like Samoa focus on ways of developing education quality through effective teacher preparation programs (Nuangchalem & Prachagool, 2010, p. 1), assuming that stable and successful pre-service teacher education will ensure improvements in teaching and learning in schools.

In reviewing the effectiveness of education in Samoa, the MESC (2015a, p.49) reports that "... the quality of teaching, inadequate teaching resources and minimal support for teachers, may be causal factors for unsatisfactory students results in schools". (Luamanu, 2017, p.1), reviewing the PILNA (Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment) and PaBER (Pacific Benchmarking for Education Results), has reported "low performance in students' assessment" due to the "low competence level of teachers". The MESC response to the report is a renewed commitment to enhance the quality of teaching in Samoa. In so doing, its new corporate plan looks at Education for Sustainable Development through teacher professional development (MESC, 2015a). The MESC initiative aims to have teachers upgrade their certificate and diploma qualifications to a Bachelor of Education (BEd) or Master of Education (MEd).

This paper interrogates Samoa's preservice teacher education system by investigating the effectiveness of training programs in the Faculty of Education of the National University of Samoa (NUS). Student teachers and an executive member from the MESC were asked for their opinion of training programs and their relevance to teaching in schools. The research also considers the ability levels of preservice teachers entering the system, examines the goals of the teacher education program, assesses whether these goals are valid and appropriate, and seeks to identify any mismatch between goals and program delivery.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

Recently, the NUS Faculty of Education realigned the courses in its Bachelor of Education program from 32 to 24, with the goal of accommodating both pre-service and in-service teachers, the latter having returned for higher qualifications. Pre-service programs have undergone major changes in recent years, with transitions from certificate to diploma, and then to degree level, with a four-year Bachelor of Education. The latter was interrupted in 2016, after only two years, by a sudden decision to change to a three-year degree for primary trainees, and to phase out the secondary program. Students pursuing secondary teaching then had to complete degrees in their major field of teaching in the faculty of their choice before completing a one-year teaching diploma at the Faculty of Education. These changes have contributed to a number of problems, such as the failure to incorporate the Samoan cultural context into the program, notwithstanding MESC (2015a, p.58) advocating through its EFA goals an improvement in the development of more "local and relevant resources" in schools.

Concurrently, Tuia (2013) in his study of student teachers at the NUS Faculty of Education has reported that some of the teacher participants and former students have raised concerns regarding their "...unfamiliarity with ... education courses" (Tuia, 2013, p. 42), which may have created difficulties for some "...to achieve satisfactory results" (Tuia, 2013, p. 126). The concern mainly rests on their teaching capabilities after graduation. This correlates with the Samoa Education Sector Program (SESP, 2015, p. 37) report on teacher education that there are "problems in aligning pre-service teacher training to the new curriculum".

These problems in the preparation of student teachers are challenging. The Samoa Education Sector Plan (2013, p. 25) has indicated “high expectations in terms of quality benchmarks and professional standards” for teachers in Samoa. That is, student teachers are expected to acquire appropriate skills and knowledge of teaching and learning methodologies to successfully implement the curriculum. Consequently, the courses in the NUS programs continue to utilise western ideas and methods, with very little local context in all courses. This is due to the educational materials that lecturers use for their courses, which are mainly textbooks from western countries. In addition, most of these lecturers were educated in New Zealand and Australia, and have given little consideration to the relevance of local knowledge and wisdom in education.

The incorporation of Samoan indigenous knowledge and wisdom in teacher education programs could broaden western ideas so that students are able to understand education from both indigenous and global perspectives. Nabobo-Baba (2013, p. 85) has argued that graduates should be “... sensitised to indigenous knowledges, philosophies, values and ideas of education”, which should always be the focus of education in the region. Instead, more indigenous students fail the system, while more global educational changes continue to flood education systems in Oceania. As observed by Teaero (1999, p. 32), “... formal education, of which teacher education is a part, is really a foreign import into Oceania”. This explains educational difficulties encountered by some pre-service teachers, due to their misconceptions of foreign systems. Ah Chong, Soaemalelagi, & Tuia (2008), concluded that many of the school principals involved in their research showed disappointment with new teachers’ classroom behaviour and cultural performance in their schools. Similarly, Tuia (2013, p. 100) noted: “... some principals claimed that some new teachers disrespected senior staff members, disobeyed school rules and regulations, had poor dress codes, did not attend to their classes or arrived late to school”. Tuia (2013) noted that these are unacceptable behaviours, both in schools and in Samoan culture generally.

Principals also have queried teacher education and the effectiveness of pre-service training. Their concern coincides with apprehensions about the types of student teachers currently being trained. Most lack English academic writing, reading and speaking skills, especially in English. Recent research conducted by the Pacific Island Literacy and Numeracy Assessment) (Luamanu, 2017), a regional organisation responsible for education improvement in the region, noted educational problems in Samoa. Their report, published in the *Samoa Observer* in May 2017, pointed to the educational weakness of teachers with poor English in speaking and writing (Luamanu, 2017, p. 1). In addition, a follow-up letter to the editor by a former educator, also published in the *Samoa Observer*, clearly put the blame on teachers and principals with poor English in speaking and writing. Such claims correspond to the Samoa Education Sector Plan July 2013 – June 2018 (2013, p. 24), which reported that “... the quality of school leavers entering the Faculty of Education at NUS to train as teachers is also a concern ... teaching for many is not their career of choice but of necessity”. Clearly the Samoan government should have measures in place to evaluate the qualifications, knowledge, skills, interests and experiences of those entering the teaching profession, and rigorous selection procedures based on this evaluation.

CURRENT PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION INITIATIVES IN SAMOA

The Samoan Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture Strategic Policies and Plan, July 2006 – June 2015 (MESC, 2006, p. 25) put forward a teaching service vision for “... sustainable, creative and on-going teacher education programs (pre and in service) that produce good quality and committed teachers”. While some aspects of the plan have been achieved, others still need attention, especially in relation to the quality of the teacher education intake, and the quality of training programs and resources. Similarly, the National Teacher Development Framework emphasises that improvements are needed in teacher quality, commitment, motivation and morale, as well as in professional skills” (MESC, 2015a, pp. 13-14).

The MESC Education Statistical Digest (2016, p. 59) reports that there is “... a lack of professional knowledge, practice and delivery” thereby contributing “... to the low level of skills and practice of students enrolled at the NUS Faculty of Education”. Although Samoa's education policy contains adequate teacher education policies to guide teaching and learning in the classroom the quality of future teachers is severely tested. The MESC (2016, p. 59), in its Educational Statistical Digest, advocated the importance of monitoring teachers through its *Teachers Intervention Support Program* to ensure improvements in teacher capacity-building as well as promoting professional development, the ultimate goal being to strengthen “... the teaching skills, content knowledge ... and planning” of new recruits.

METHODOLOGY

The present study utilised a Samoan qualitative research methodology of *talanoa* and *nofo*, which draws its elements from the social and cultural aspects of Samoan culture. *Talanoa* is perceived as a conversation. It has a deep connotation in the Samoan language in relation to research. *Nofo* is known as sitting in Samoan, and has a significant cultural relationship to *talanoa*, as both represent Samoan cultural protocols in doing research in Samoan cultural contexts. Fua (2009, p. 57), a researcher of Tongan heritage, referred to *nofo* as to “reside or to stay”. In Samoa, *nofo* represents Samoan cultural values of behaviour accorded to others (*ava fatafata*), mutual respect (*va fealoai*), respect (*faaaloalo*), and reciprocity (*feavatai/ fetausiai*) (Tuia, 2013, p. 23). As is the nature of Samoan people, they usually invite unknown passers-by to *nofo* and rest without considering the consequences. During these *nofo* sessions, the unknown and their new families *talanoa*, beginning to know more about each other.

Talanoa can be referred to as conversation, a talk, an exchange of ideas or thinking, whether formal or informal and is often carried out face-to-face (Vaiote 2006, p. 23). Doing *talanoa* in an indigenous cultural and social manner thus provides people with the freedom to dialogue without fear of using indigenous language. *Nofo* in this cultural situation is significant in doing research in the Samoan context. One does not always engage with others in *talanoa* by standing; it all depends on the age and the status of the person in one's family, village and church. In addition, if *matai*s (chiefs) are involved, then conducting *talanoa* and *nofo* should be culturally appropriate, sitting with folded legs, and conversing using cultural language. This process reinforces cultural values of behaviour

accorded to others (*ava fatafata*), mutual respect (*va fealoai*), respect (*faaaloalo*), and reciprocity (*feavatai/fetausiai*) (Tuia, 2013, p. 23). Unlike *talanoa* in the general sense, having a group of friends or two people conversing is not necessarily being seated in dialogue, but this can be done by standing or just sitting without folding legs. This was the kind of dialogue that the researcher and participants had at the time of data collection. Students had the freedom to move and talk amongst one another, while at the same time, respecting the presence of the researcher. The incorporation of cultural aspects of *talanoa* and *nofo* in research from the Samoan context relies on the people that are involved in the research. For instance, in this study, the researcher permitted the participants to act and move freely. They were not subjected to the Samoan cultural protocols because of the researcher's presence. There were twenty student teacher participants, and one executive from the Ministry of Education. Data collection was conducted through the utilisation of student participants in a focus group discussion, while the MESC executive was interviewed.

The data collected was guided by the work of Sarantakos (1998) and Neuman (1994, cited in Sarantakos, 1998). Sarantakos' (1998) method of analysis is a cyclical process with three stages: reduction of data, data organisation and interpretation of data. In addition, Neuman's (1994) typology method of analysis examines and evaluates the relevance and effectiveness of the interpretation of data after extraction and the final formulation of the main research themes. Subsequently, themes are generated from the data, which emerge from participants' opinions and views. These are carefully, scrutinised, organised and classified into appropriate themes that best represented the aim and focus of the research.

PARTICIPANTS' VIEWS ON SAMOAN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER EDUCATION

Students' responses to the research through the utilisation of *talanoa* and *nofo* (focus group discussions) unveiled some critical aspects of education that were a major hurdle to most students striving to complete their studies. The NUS Faculty of Education was largely unaware of these. Three themes emerged from the data: (i) relevance of the preservice education program; (ii) a desire for courses to be contextualised, and representative of Samoan culture, rather than based solely on ideas, theories and examples from other countries; (iii) use of English language should be relevant for second-language speakers, and should be clearly understood and provide examples for comprehension.

Responses to the first theme were based on the relevance of the program to participants, some reporting positively on lecturers; e.g., "I like the Critical Thinking course, because it helps to make me think extensively and comprehend more about the different aspects of what I am teaching in Secondary schools" (Student 13); and: "The program is OK for me, because I get to learn some new things that I was unaware of" (Student 7). Similarly, students 14, 15 and 17 supported the program, explaining that the way they were taught to acquire knowledge and skills from their pedagogy courses was very clear and comprehensive, unlike students 16 and 19 who indicated their discontent with the program because they did not get along with some lecturers. For instance, student 16 reported: "My lecturer in my other course never pay any attention to me, and also never give us a second chance to re-do our failed essay". Student 19 said: "Some lecturers talk too fast and it is

very hard to catch up with them". This showed that not all students found the program relevant to their studies because of problems with lecturers.

Responses to theme two indicated that some students were frustrated by difficulties encountered in the courses that they were studying. According to student 4, "Many of the readings that I use for one of my education course is so hard to understand". Student 11 indicated that: "Most examples used by lecturers to introduce or clarify an idea of the topic is alien to me". Views presented under theme two were consistent with those in theme 3. Participants complained about the courses they studied, and learning outcomes were perceived as unclear. In addition, it seemed some of these students have difficulties understanding their reading materials and have problems communicating in English with their lecturers. According to student 10: "I have problems understanding my lecturer most of the time whenever he speaks in English," and student 3: "I don't understand most of what I am learning in my other course, which is Critical Thinking, because my lecturer uses very big English words". Student 9 adds, "I don't know how this course relates to what I am teaching in primary school, because it is all about people from other countries". Similarly, student 5 said, "Ethics and values is a difficult course, and most of what I am learning in this course is very similar to ethics and values that my parents taught and I really don't know why I am doing this course". Moreover, these same students agreed that the content of these courses should be more relevant to their practice in primary schools.

As stated earlier, the perceived irrelevance of the program was based on the lack of integration of local cultural contexts with global ideas and perspectives. Students found that most of what they were learning derived from western knowledge, which was viewed as less significant to Samoa. However, the MESC executive stressed the importance of the program in the training of student teachers to acquire appropriate knowledge and skills of teaching and learning. In fact, concern about irrelevance expressed by students was something that the MESC executive had learned from the principals and senior teachers from various schools in Samoa: "Some principals and senior teachers have informed MESC that most of the new teachers recruited have problems in classroom teaching, behaviour, and understanding teaching materials". It was the same concern raised by principals, when asked of their perceptions of new teachers in their schools. Most senior teachers and principals blamed the program for not training student teachers properly. However, the MESC executive claimed: "There is an improvement with many new teachers coming into the field with regards to classroom performance and behaviour towards quality teaching and learning. (This) has contributed to the development of better education at school level". He also expressed the view that those who deliver the content knowledge of the program should have more cultural knowledge and ideas, rather than relying on western ideas and methods to deliver lectures.

In summary, the research has revealed that the main frustration over the pre-service teacher education system is not about the system itself, nor just about student teachers, but that both the system and the students have failed one another. On one hand, the program leans heavily on western theories rather than drawing on local examples, so that learners can connect local social, cultural and educational ideas to global ones. On the other hand, local

student teachers should make time and effort to consolidate their learning in order to achieve their goals.

Nabobo-Baba (2013, p. 85) explains that in order for the new ideas UNESCO has proposed to be more effective, implementation of courses in preservice teacher education programs should focus on the importance of regional cultures, languages and wisdoms. Thaman (2012, p. 1), argued that the Pacific region "... ought to be more culturally democratic, taking more serious consideration of the ways in which Pacific people think, learn and communicate with one another". Samoans should become critically aware by comparing and contrasting their cultural values and beliefs with those of the outside world. Although current pre-service teacher education programs around the Oceania region are organised by indigenous educators, their objectives and methods are derived largely from western theories and methodologies. It is the responsibility of local educators to ensure that programs are appropriate and relevant to local student learning, both in and out of the classroom.

Student teachers should also be more vigilant and assiduous throughout their time at NUS to gain greater knowledge and skills to assist with teaching. As Thaman (1995, p. 1) argued, "... it is an urgent need for the Pacific region to take on board culturally-inclusive and culturally-sensitive educational practices and to contextualise our teaching and learning in the Pacific", rather than relying solely on western teaching and learning theories and practices. Contextualising our current teaching and learning by drawing on indigenous cultural values and beliefs will provide student teachers with a clearer educational vision, and help them achieve a balance between western theories and Samoan cultural practices.

CONCLUSION

The Samoan education system, while improving, also contains unsuccessful objectives and goals due to poor quality teacher education. The current preservice teacher education system as reported by MESC (2015a) and UNESCO (2011) may be relevant to a former colonised nation, but inappropriate to the current social, cultural, educational and economical needs and interests of Samoa. There is a need to incorporate more local knowledge and wisdom into teaching and learning, and a need for educational examples and ideas to be contextualised to capture hybrid Samoan cultural values, beliefs and ideas as a way of making learning more flexible for students.

As argued throughout this paper, a pre-service education program that incorporates appropriate educational ideas and values, and addresses contemporary needs, will eventually produce better results for all. It is crucial that MESC and the NUS Faculty of Education work collaboratively to ensure that pre-service teacher education programs are aligned with the school curriculum, strengthen English language competencies, and help students apply what they have learned to their teaching. Currently the program has fallen short of ensuring all students fulfil their potential. By not enhancing student performance the nation is adversely affected. Student teachers have not ultimately satisfied the criteria that enable them to become effective as teachers. It is vital that the Samoa pre-service teacher education program be more inclusive of local values and knowledge, thereby contributing to more successful outcomes.

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